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Prime Minister Shinzo Abe of Japan with President Trump in Florida on April 17.

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Japan's security is largely in Trump's hands

TOKYO

As Japan watches its closest ally explore a historic deal with its worst enemy, the Japanese government has little choice but to support the diplomatic opening between the United States and North Korea. But as Japan's security is now largely in President Trump's hands, Tokyo's mission is to keep Trump close and hold him to tough terms as he prepares for a potential showdown with Kim Jong Un.

Publicly, there's no daylight between the Trump administration and the government of Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe. Japanese Foreign Minister Taro Kono told me in an interview he has received assurances from senior Trump administration officials that the United States will stick to a hard line in negotiations with Pyongyang. Kono believes Trump will insist on complete, verifiable and irreversible dismantlement (CVID) of North Korea's nuclear weapons and all ballistic missile programs before giving the Kim regime any sanctions relief or other economic benefits.

"The international community's intention is they need to complete the CVID process before they can expect anything out of it," Kono said. "How can complete, verifiable, irreversible dismantlement be partial?"

If that sounds like what national security adviser John Bolton controversially referred to as "the Libya model" in April, it is. Neither Kono nor Bolton would use that reference now, after both Trump and Kim equated it with the subsequent overthrow of Moammar Gaddafi. But make no mistake: Both Japan and Bolton are advocating that North Korea completely fulfill its side of the bargain first.

North Korea, China and Russia are putting forth different terms, pushing

for step-by-step concessions. But Kono expressed confidence that Trump will stick to this hard line if he meets Kim in Singapore on June 12.

"I don't think the Trump administration will allow any deviation. When they talk about CVID, they talk about all the nuclear weapons and the nuclear facilities plus missiles of all ranges," he said. "I don't think there are any differences between the United States and Japan at all."

Privately, some Japanese and U.S. officials aren't so sure. Secretary of State Mike Pompeo told the House Foreign Affairs Committee last week that economic relief could come after North Korea takes "credible steps" or "an irreversible set of actions," but he stopped short of demanding total dismantlement up front. On Wednesday, a senior State Department official said only that denuclearization is the goal and Pompeo wants to leave room for negotiation.

Other U.S. officials tell me they could envision a deal that eliminates North Korea's missiles that could reach the United States but leaves Pyongyang with missiles that could threaten Japan and the rest of the region.

Regardless, Japan's public position is maximalist. Not only must Pyongyang dismantle all its nuclear and missile programs, but also it must resolve the cases of 12 Japanese abductees who remain unaccounted for in North Korea, an issue Trump promised Abe he would add to the agenda.

If North Korea does all that, Japan will normalize relations and provide economic assistance, Katsunobu Kato, Japan's minister in charge of the abductee issue, told me. But, "without resolution of the abduction matter, North Korea is not in a position to envision any bright future for itself," he said.

The Japanese government's message is directed both to its domestic audience and the Trump administration. But with Trump changing his mind by the day, Tokyo can't be sure what Trump will say or do inside the room. To influence Trump ahead of a summit, Abe's personal relationship with Trump is key.

Abe was first on the scene at Trump Tower after Trump's election. Abe and Trump have spent more than a dozen hours together one-on-one at Mar-a-Lago and elsewhere. Officials close to both men say that they genuinely like each other and that Trump respects Abe's opinion and seeks his counsel.

Trump has a real incentive to keep Abe close. If the summit fails or doesn't happen, the Trump administration will attempt to return to maximum pressure, perhaps without full Chinese and South Korean support. In that environment, if North Korea offered Japan resolution of the abductee issue in exchange for aid, Abe would have a tough political decision to make. Right now there is no public space between Japan and the United States, but that could change.

Is Trump thinking through the regional strategic implications of his meeting with Kim? Is he in command of the details, aware of all the permutations and factoring in allies' interests as he prepares to possibly sit down at that table? For Japan, Trump's personal unpredictability is the biggest and most dangerous unknown in the entire equation. In that respect, we are all in the same boat.

Abe has a chance to pin Trump down when the two meet in Quebec during the Group of Seven summit next week. For everyone's sake, let's hope Abe is able to impress upon Trump's mind what a good deal with North Korea actually would look like.

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